United Nations A/56/87

General Assembly

Distr.: General
6 June 2001

Original: English

Fifty-sixth session
Item 37 of the preliminary list*
United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations

Letter dated 1 June 2001 from the Permanent Representatives of Lithuania and Poland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

We have the honour to recall the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) General Conference resolution 31 of 17 November 1999, which endorsed the terms of proclaiming the year 2001 as the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, welcoming "the collective endeavour of the international community to enhance understanding through constructive dialogue among civilizations on the threshold of the third millennium". It also recognized "the importance of the values embodied in the resolution, such as the importance in international relations and the significant role of dialogue as a means of reaching understanding, removing threats to peace and strengthening interaction and exchange among civilizations".

In the spirit of the above-mentioned UNESCO resolution, the International Conference on the Dialogue among Civilizations was held in Vilnius, Lithuania, from 24 to 26 April 2001, under the joint auspices of H.E. Mr. Valdas Adamkus, President of the Republic of Lithuania, H.E. Mr. Aleksander Kwasniewski, President of the Republic of Poland, and H.E. Mr. Koïchiro Matsuura, Director-General of UNESCO.

We have the honour to transmit the text of the Vilnius Declaration, which was adopted during the aforementioned Conference (see annex), and would be grateful if the text of this letter and its annex were distributed as an official document of the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly, under item 37 of the preliminary list.

(*Signed*) Dr. Gediminas **Šerkšnys**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Lithuania to the United Nations

(*Signed*) Janusz **Stanczyk**
Ambassador
Permanent Representative of the Republic of Poland to the United Nations

* A/56/50.

01-40163 (E) 070601

Annex to the letter dated 1 June 2001 from the Permanent Representatives of Lithuania and Poland to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

Vilnius Declaration

1. Civilizations are entities of faith, historical memory, moral imagination and human connection. They contain historically unique and self-asserting cultures, irreplaceable forms of human creativity, and also the intellectual and moral sensibilities of large groups of people. Biodiversity and cultural diversity are closely linked and are instrumental for the ability of humankind to adapt, create and invent. No civilization can solely assume the responsibility for all humanity; neither can a single civilization claim exclusive rights to provide an ultimate and universally valid vision of how to be a human being in the complex and multifaceted world of today and tomorrow. Like human beings, the historically formed and living civilizations can never be interchangeable since they are all equally unique and valuable. The loss of any single trait of one civilization is a loss for all humanity.

2. The ideas of tolerance and of the dialogue among civilizations rest on a clear awareness of human incompleteness. This is particularly true of the concept of "the polylogue of civilizations" elaborated by Vytautas Kavolis, a great Lithuanian scholar.

3. Up to now the political exploitation of the concept of civilizations has been among the most problematic traits of modern social sciences and humanities. Regrettably, the theoretically exhausted and morally dubious inclination to employ or even exceedingly exploit the concept of civilization for sheer political and ideological purposes is still the case.

4. Simplistic, monologue-based or otherwise politically convenient notions of civilization should not be applied. Contrary to a firm conviction that Western civilization was the only civilization nurtured by dialogue-based individualism, liberty and toleration, scholars have stressed the importance of each civilization and the dialogue among them as an inescapable part of the concept of civilization itself.

5. Civilizations are symbolic designs within which people raise core questions concerning their being in the world, and also search for key concepts and frames of meaning to interpret themselves and the world around them. No civilization can be regarded as a theory-emanating entity solely capable of interpreting the world and therefore framing the rest of the world as its empirical evidence. Genuine dialogue allows no room for absolute otherness, for it occurs among morally committed human individuals.

6. No civilization can assume or represent complete humanity. The comparative approach therefore brings us to a proper understanding of the complementarity of civilizations. It powerfully stands against bias, clichés, demonization of the other and the sense of superiority over other societies and cultures. The complementarity of civilizations would be unthinkable without the constant interplay and exchange of such faculties of human thought and creativity as science, art and philosophy; nor would it be possible without the ethical and spiritual dimension. Women and young people can play a crucial part in the process of bridging and uniting the world.

7. As a crucial attempt to uphold mutual respect, sympathetic understanding and tolerance, the dialogue among civilizations is the only means to build a world of human dignity, solidarity and hope. Such a dialogue of multiple, pluralistic and communicating identities would result in a multi-civilizational universe of discourse. No civilization could be demonized, and references to all of them, their intellectual traditions and masterpieces of art would come to the contemporary individual as easily and naturally as references to his or her own civilization. A particular civilization can experience itself or critically examine its core values only through a dialogue with other civilizations.

8. All Governments and civil societies are enjoined, as an integrated part of their cultural policies, to take the initiative to further a dialogue among civilizations in such a way that it can become an instrument of transformation, a yardstick for peace and tolerance and a vehicle for diversity and pluralism, especially in culture, with the ultimate aim of furthering the common good.